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Last week, the Illinois House of Representatives passed legislation that will dramatically reform public education in Illinois. The bill, which is targeted at improving student performance, passed the Senate unanimously in April.

Reform efforts were spearheaded by Assistant Senate Majority Leader Kimberly A. Lightford (D-Maywood), who led months of negotiations between teachers, administrators and reform groups. Since it passed the Senate, the bill has been widely hailed as a monumental step toward improving outcomes for children in Illinois and has been described as a national model by United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

The reform bill will directly impact students by making sure that they have access to quality educators. The bill ends the practice of "last hired, first fired" by making sure that teacher performance is a higher priority than seniority in staffing decisions. The bill streamlines the process for dismissing poorly-performing teachers and provides that only teachers who consistently receive positive performance evaluations over a four-year period are able to receive tenure.

Under the proposal, Chicago is authorized to increase the number of hours in the school day and the number of days in the school year to allow students greater exposure to instructors. Chicago currently has the shortest school day of any major school system in the United States.

One of the biggest obstacles that had to be overcome during negotiations was the issue of teachers' right to strike. In the end, a compromise was achieved, allowing for more transparency and increased requirements before unions can go on strike.

In recent days, the Chicago Teachers' Union (CTU) voiced concerns about how certain language in the bill was drafted. While it was initially suggested that the bill would be amended, those concerns will be dealt with in a trailer bill.

Senate Bill 7 will become law upon the Governor's signature.



**From The Archives:**

**April 14, 2011:** At 7:47 pm, the Illinois Senate advanced historic education reform legislation that will make the State's educational system more accountable to parents, students, and taxpayers. The bill is the culmination of months of negotiation led by Senate Assistant Majority Leader Kimberly A. Lightford (D-Maywood) between

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lawmakers, teachers, administrators, and reform groups.

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The bill - Senate Bill 630 – makes several landmark changes to the State's public education system, including placing a greater focus on teacher performance instead of seniority when it comes to school staffing decisions, requiring school board members to receive training within one year of being elected, and slowing down the process of teacher strikes to allow for greater transparency and more time for negotiations.

The bill, which has the support of Illinois Governor Pat Quinn, passed the Senate unanimously. It now goes to the House of Representatives for further consideration.



"The answer to improving education can be found in improving the quality of teachers leading our classrooms. With that firm belief, Senator Kimberly Lightford led a collaborative approach to education reform that married diverse interests with one goal - putting our students first.

Since the moment that I announced a Special Committee on Education Reform, Senator Lightford has labored in negotiations that put sacred cows such as tenure and teacher strikes on the table for scrutiny. The result is a new set of policies that will help promote the best teachers and improve the educational outcomes for students in Illinois.

I applaud all of the reform stakeholders for demonstrating that the process can work when we are willing to work together."

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**EARLIER TODAY:** Flanked by organizational leaders who represent school personnel, teachers, administrators, parents and school reform advocates, Assistant Senate Majority Leader Kimberly A. Lightford (D-Maywood) today unveiled a comprehensive education reform package aimed at improving performance and accountability for Illinois school professionals and the students they teach.

"We have come together today to endorse an initiative that puts a priority on performance and accountability to ensure the best educational outcomes for Illinois students," Lightford said. "This is the result of all sides – reformers, unions and administrators - coming together to find workable solutions to long disputed issues."

Some of the major changes under Lightford's legislation (Senate Bill 7) are provisions that make it harder for teachers to strike, put a priority on teacher performance instead of seniority when it comes to layoffs, increase the performance standards for educators who seek to attain tenure and streamline the system to ensure that unsatisfactory instructors can more easily be removed from their jobs.

Among the biggest hurdles that Lightford had to negotiate was the demand of some to eliminate unions' abilities to strike with the line-in-the-sand demands of union leaders to maintain the seldom used right. After intense negotiation sessions, Lightford achieved a

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compromise that allows for more transparency and increased requirements before unions can go on strike.

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For Chicago, where many have demanded longer school days and an increased school calendar, union officials agreed to a provision that allows school officials to make those changes, but requires the impact on teachers to be bargained. This means that an increase in classroom instruction could be imposed, but some compensation would have to be discussed in contract negotiations. In addition, to strike, the union would have to earn approval of three-fourths of all members instead of the current simple majority.

“Discussing strike was a tense and often uncomfortable process for everyone,” Lightford said. “But I believe that both sides of the issue were surprised to learn how reasonable the others were when we began to drill into the details of strike reform. I am very proud of everyone for being so professional and respectful on such an emotional issue.”

Raw video of the press conference below, courtesy [BlueRoomStream.com](http://BlueRoomStream.com):